

ON BALANCE

## Beyond Organizational Tinkering: A New View of School Reform

---

*by Perry R. Rettig*

American public schools are in clear need of real school reform—reform centered on leadership style and organizational structure. To help bring about such reform, we must look at lessons taught by the new sciences and through the lens of critical theory.

### **A Historical Look at American School Administration**

At the beginning of the Industrial Age, businesses organized their burgeoning systems using military counterparts for examples, and public schools soon followed suit. That model, called “classical organizational thought” or “scientific management,” remains the predominant feature of our school systems today.

The primary purpose of the closed systems approach is creating efficiency. Positivistic and deterministic, the model uses a machine metaphor. In other words, administrators in classically structured organizations believe in direct cause-and-effect relationships. They believe that a system needs to be highly structured with clear expectations for all employees. The superiors are “in charge.” Eventually, huge, cumbersome bureaucracies were created to maintain these features.

While retaining the foundational tenets of early closed systems theories, twentieth-century school systems evolved from the strictly classical scientific management approach to two new approaches: first a human relations approach, and then a neoscientific one. The human relations approach was taught in college classrooms beginning in the 1920s, but its heyday lasted only some twenty years, from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. Human relations practitioners wanted teachers and other constituents to “feel” empowered, when in practice the administrators themselves made the decisions—a “velvet glove in an iron fist” approach. Nonetheless, the human relations approach acquired a *laissez faire* reputation, and by the 1980s accountability-driven neoscientific models began to supplant it. The human relations and the neoscientific

approaches both remain with us today, and they should be considered closed-systems thinking (Marion 2002).

All closed systems approaches share perceptions about employees and how to manage them. Those perceptions are what McGregor has described as Theory X. Throughout the twentieth century, and continuing today, administrators have believed that professional staff members need management, manipulation, and control. Classical Newtonian science told them that the world could be understood and manipulated much like a machine with simple, linear, cause-and-effect relationships.

Actually, it was not the science but its application to organizations that was wrong. While many scholars have understood the misapplication of classical science, they have nonetheless failed to change the practice of school district administrators.

Before viewing our operational strategies through a critical lens, let's turn our attention to new discoveries and thinking that can enhance open systems theories.

## **Open Systems and the New Sciences**

Contemporary anti-positivistic approaches, known as open systems theories, arose in reaction to the shortcomings of the older theories. The open systems theories all have a few things in common. First, they hold that few simple cause-effect relationships exist within real-life systems. Effects are often far removed—in time and space—from their multiple causes. Second, top-down hierarchies, even though designed for efficiency, are ineffective and inefficient. Finally, human organizations should be considered as dynamic living systems, unlike the rigid closed system models that fail to interact with their environments.

It is important here to reiterate the original point of this brief. Despite minor changes in site-based management, alternative schooling options, and curriculum/instruction, critical theory and open systems perspectives have apparently failed to impact substantive reform in local school systems. Districts maintain the same rigid bureaucratic hierarchies they have had for the past century. Instances of staff involvement in decision-making and professional autonomy are cloaked in the manipulative closed system approaches of human relations theory.

The classical sciences, while brilliant, are limited to closed mechanical systems—a significantly small portion of all systems in the universe. In contrast, today's modern quantum physics and the other newer sciences represent nearly all systems scientists have discovered. Few educators have embraced, or even heard of, the new sciences, whose lessons may be profound for understanding and operating our organizations. The thought of open systems theorists, including critical theorists, parallels that in the newer sciences.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detailed descriptions of the new and exciting discoveries and theories from the new sciences. We have learned, however, that much of what we have come to take as sacred in our institutions is wrong. Elsewhere, I have stated that:

- With a duality in nature, there is also complementarity and uncertainty.
- People and systems are subjective and cannot be observed objectively.
- All of nature is unified and interconnected.
- A web of relationships is central to this unification.
- Changes at the local level can make huge impacts at the system level.
- What might appear to be chaos may actually be an underlying order. (Rettig 2002, pp. 87–90)

We have come to view problems and issues in black-and-white terms. Furthermore, people have preconceived ideas; they don't act rationally and therefore cannot be understood in a logical, linear fashion. Likewise, school systems, departments within those systems, and people in those departments are interconnected in irreducible fashion. We cannot isolate one portion from the system, analyze it, and put it back together (Wheatley 1994). Making the smallest change at any local level can cause reverberations throughout the entire system. In fact, the effect may be much larger than the cause.

Finally, a systems lens requires that we view our organizations over time and space and not just the moment. Often all we can see is chaos, but what appears chaotic may actually be an underlying order or the system's attempt to reorganize itself (Prigogine and Stengers 1984). Living systems must be able to adapt and change (Capra 1996); however, many mechanical and linear thinkers who sense chaos try controlling it. The effect is to squeeze the life from organizations, and those who work within the organizations don't even see it. Some people, however, do see it: the parents who are leaving traditional public schools; the politicians who demand standardization and accountability; and the teachers who have been beaten down by the system. Here is where critical theory fits in.

## **A New Critical Theory View**

An overview of critical theory as described by Thomas Kuhn can include the concerns covered by the varied open systems and anti-positivist theories. It was developed partially in protest against the hierarchy and the status quo. "Critical [t]heory exposes abuse by elites and explores alternative, more democratic, and egalitarian models of organization" (Marion 2002, p. 252). There were indicators of critical thinking

before it became a cogent body of work. Most notably, the fictional work of George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* contained such critical perspectives. Many consider Karl Marx the father of critical theory.

Critical theory perspectives basically hold that those atop the organizational hierarchy are in business to take care of themselves. Marx was concerned that employees were far removed from both the means and the profits in their organizations. Contemporary critical theorists are concerned that bureaucratic administrators make profits at the expense of the professionals. School systems are not immune to such abuses. "When a pattern of unexamined beliefs, taken-for-granted values, and unconscious assumptions is built into educational processes, social control of a seemingly nonevasive kind can take root" (Beyer 2001, p. 154).

In the view of critical theorists, the bosses at the top of classical management hierarchies control information and make final decisions with little or no real input from professional line workers; meanwhile, the bureaucrats set direction, create expectations, and inspect the professionals' progress toward those expectations. When they cut budgets, administrators make decisions with "patriarchal compassion." School personnel find themselves operationally led by innumerable impersonal policies. Staff development often has little to do with individual classroom instruction, and teacher supervision and evaluation are often perfunctory. Curricular choices are decided by curriculum experts at central offices and adopted by school board members, all of whom are far removed from the classroom.

Likewise, "shared decision-making" protocols tend to be patriarchal. Teachers who "feel" empowered but are not truly empowered are being manipulated. "[Critical theory's] advocates argue that even the more humanistic approaches to management (such as TQM) subjugate workers to the interests of a ruling elite" (Marion 2002, p. 252). Quite frankly, it appears that most administrators don't trust their employees. As Jermier (1998, p. 235) noted, "Contemporary mechanisms of control are often unobtrusive." The bureaucracy is running the profession.

## **A New Open Systems View through a Critical Lens**

It is time to revisit critical theory in light of what we are beginning to learn through the new sciences. After all, the classical sciences taught us lessons that we used to create today's organizations, yet we now know that organizations are natural and dynamic, and that closed system's classical models are inefficient. We need, therefore, to use open systems' critical theory to help us to reexamine our beliefs about our institutions and to use new approaches to recreate our organizations.

The new sciences tell us that hierarchies don't exist in nature and that today's systems must be flexible and adaptive to external forces. Critical theory has taught us to be wary of hierarchical structures and concerned with the motives of those who sit upon the hierarchy. There is little doubt that hierarchies and subsequent bureaucracies have taken on a life of their own—a life that is choking out the systems.

We have also learned from the new sciences that interconnected relationships are central to all systems. Rather than build rigid hierarchies, we must create webs of relationships both internal and external to the organizations. These relationships must be fluid and flexible to adapt quickly to changes and to continue to grow.

Critical theorists urge us to truly empower teachers in professional decision-making. Site-based teams, total quality management teams, strategic planning sessions, and mentoring programs are all methods human relationists use to manipulate teachers to conform, but it is not important for teachers to “feel” empowered; it is imperative that they *be* empowered.

Effective teachers reflect critically on the moral, political, social, and economic dimensions of education. This requires an understanding of the multiple contexts in which schools function, an appreciation of diverse perspectives on educational issues, and a commitment to democratic forms of interaction

(Sirotnik 1983, p. 161).

Furthermore, critical theory demands that those in power continually reflect upon their actions and policies to evaluate both their purposes and their effects. Critical theory was founded on concern for how those in hierarchies control subordinates through abuse and manipulation. The new sciences tell us that in natural systems, apparent chaos and disorder might actually be a new order unfolding. The very act of control and demand for homeostasis might actually harm or even kill the organization. At times, we might need to allow the chaos to arise and the new order to unfold.

Finally, critical theory would support the notion of the new sciences that tiny changes at the grass-roots level can ripple throughout an organization and lead to systemwide changes. That effect gives power to those lineworkers who might feel powerless; they can make a difference.

## Conclusions

Open systems theories, despite their long pedigree, have not been satisfactorily enmeshed in the fabric of our school systems. “Critical theory has remained somewhat on the fringe of organizational theory because of [its] radical leaning and because of its ‘in your face’ challenge

to the status quo" (Marion 2002, p. 254). Yet with the lessons we are learning from the new sciences, open systems theories should become more central to all educational administration preparation programs. Likewise, the tenets of critical theory, bolstered by the new research, should no longer be just an interesting and fashionable topic in administrator preservice programs. If we continue to teach what we have always taught, we will always get what we always got. We must take a truly critical look at the need for our current hierarchical structures. Are they the most effective and efficient models we can think of? What better ways are there of organizing our systems in this postmodern world?

Universities, however, can play only one part in this needed reform movement. Their graduates are absorbed into rigid hierarchies and mentored with the velvet-gloved iron fist of power and authority. Those in the hierarchy naturally will resist changing what makes them comfortable; they may lose salaries and benefits. If change is not made from the inside, however, it will come from the outside. It has begun with charter schools, school choice, vouchers—and legislators who promote such policies.

Here is where the universities must play a role. As we have learned from the new sciences in open systems theories, small changes can have a huge impact as they ripple across the web of our organizations. We have no choice but to begin taking a truly critical look at our school systems.

## References

- Beyer, L. 2001. "The Value of Critical Perspectives in Teacher Education." *Journal of Teacher Education* 52 (2): 151–163.
- Capra, F. 1996. *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday.
- Huxley, A. 1969. *Brave New World*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Jermier, J. 1998. "Critical Perspectives on Organizational Control." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 43: 235–256.
- Marion, R. 2002. *Leadership in Education: Organizational Theory for the Practitioner*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Orwell, G. 1949. *1984*. London: Martin Secker & Warburg.
- Prigogine, I., and I. Stengers. 1984. *Order Out of Chaos*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Rettig, P. 2002. *Quantum Leaps in School Leadership*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press.
- Sirotnik, K. 1983. "What You See Is What You Get: Consistency, Persistency, and Mediocrity in Classrooms." *Harvard Educational Review* 53: 16–31.
- Wheatley, M. 1994. *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organizations from an Orderly Universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

---

*Perry R. Rettig, Ph.D., is Coordinator of Educational Leadership at the College of Education and Human Services, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.*